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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000943

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NSC FOR CBARTON  
HQ USSOUTHCOM FOR POLAD  
SAN JOSE FOR USAID/OFDA TCALLAGHAN AND SVELADO

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: VENEZUELA: SIX WEEKS AFTER THE FLOODS

REF: A. CARACAS 255

[1](#)B. CARACAS 470

Classified By: ECONOMIC COUNSELOR RICHARD M. SANDERS FOR REASON 1.4 D

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) Venezuelan Red Cross officials remain highly critical of the GOV's handling of the major floods which hit the central coast (especially Vargas state) and western Venezuela in February, telling econoff that the NGO continues to get a cold shoulder at the national level and inadequate information from Caracas officials regarding the needs of displaced persons. A visit to Vargas revealed that reconstruction efforts continue to use the same techniques which failed in the last flood, as well as the far greater 1999 flood. Agricultural experts suggest that there will be a significant long term impact from the flooding on food production. U.S. assistance has been largely distributed, through the Red Cross. END SUMMARY.

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GOV ROLE - STILL GOING IT ALONE  
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[1](#)2. (C) As was the case in the immediate aftermath of the February Carnival floods, the GOV has continued with a policy of not coordinating with the Venezuelan Red Cross (VRC), or apparently other relief agencies. Dr. Hernan Bongioanni, Secretary General of the VRC, told econoff March 8 that the

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VRC had asked if they could transport relief supplies and volunteers to Merida on a Venezuelan Air Force plane. The GOV responded that they could ship supplies, but not volunteers. As the VRC wants to remain independent from the GOV, it refused the partial offer. Bongioanni noted that, even going by land, the VRC reached many of their destinations before the military. He added that, while the VRC has received many requests from Venezuelan officials, it has yet to receive any money, or even information, to help its own parallel efforts.

[1](#)3. (C) VRC officers also expressed concern that flood relief is being used as a political weapon. VRC Vice President Mario Gomez told econoff March 16 that numerous people had been escorted out of a GOV shelter after it was discovered they had signed the petition to convoke the referendum to recall President Chavez. There are also reports that housing being provided to now homeless families is being given based on the same criterion. The housing is low-quality as well - one of the buildings designated by Caracas mayor Juan Barreto had already been condemned. Bongioanni also observed that the GOV is inflating statistics of those helped by adding people whose homes were barely damaged by rising water and received as little as a meal from the GOV.

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A VISIT TO VARGAS  
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[1](#)4. (C) Econoff visited Vargas on March 17, seeing the areas that were hit hardest both in 1999 and 2005. Lack of running water was still a major concern, as one large town near the edge of the affected area had it only two consecutive days per week, while other, less accessible areas still had none at all. (As of March 30, the GOV was still delivering water by truck to affected areas.) The VRC food distribution had gone quite well, with few reported problems, mostly from families who felt they should have been included but were not. However, most of those complaints were in Camuri Grande, an area where state oil company PDVSA reportedly had delivered food to every family. In towns farther to the east - smaller, as well as less accessible - residents reported that no GOV representatives had been there, only the VRC. Julio Rodriguez, a leader of the Red Cross relief unit, said the GOV had only gone as far as journalists might go, to provide relief only where positive press coverage - especially photo-ops - could be gained.

15. (C) Many of the homeless had been temporarily sheltered in local schools. By March 30, some of them had begun a hunger strike to protest that they still had no housing. Some

reconstruction had begun on the water channels, but the biggest ones were being lined with walls of relatively small rocks held in place by chicken wire. Rodriguez observed that those were potentially worse than nothing, as a strong flow of water would turn the rocks into "projectiles." There were also two areas where large mudslides had covered the highway, making the areas beyond inaccessible by road in the immediate aftermath of the flood. These areas were passable on March 17, with work underway to clear them back to normal.

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FOOD PRODUCTION AFFECTED  
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16. (C) Agriculture and cattle farming were adversely affected by the flooding, especially in the region of Zulia south of Lake Maracaibo. Jose Luis Betancourt, President of the National Cattlemen's Federation (FEDENAGA), told press March 1 that 7-8% of national cattle production was affected. This estimate may be low, as other reports had 35% of production affected in that area, which is responsible for 60% of Venezuelan meat and milk production. There were also up to 150,000 hectares (371,000 acres) of cropland underwater, including up to 50,000 hectares (124,000 acres) of banana fields alone. Hiram Gaviria, former Minister of Agriculture, told polcouns in mid-March that cows were already being killed too young to cover the shortages, and that there would be shortages of both beef and milk in the near future.

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USG GIFT SPURS OTHERS  
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17. (SBU) On February 11, the Ambassador exercised his authority to offer assistance after a disaster, arranging for a donation of \$50,000 cash to the VRC (ref B). USAID and MilGroup contributed radios and used trucks. The Red Cross agreed to use the donation primarily for emergency food assistance in Vargas, where the Ambassador had visited just a month before (ref A). The first tranche of food kits, along with hygiene kits, was delivered to approximately 400 families in the Vargas area on March 12, with a second to follow. Temporary food assistance, paid for with private donations, was previously provided to the region. Rodriguez told econoff March 17 that the US donation had spurred others, such as the German Red Cross, to also provide significant donations, without which the VRC would not have been able assist as many families as it had, over 1200 nation-wide. Carlos Sanchez, head of the VRC relief team, told econoff on March 31 that they planned to distribute the last goods bought with USG funds on or about April 13.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) The flood and its aftermath have largely fallen off the media screen right now. The GOV's initial response was quick enough (aided by the fact that the first flooding took place during the Carnival holidays when police and military are heavily deployed to deal with travelers). It was also heavily publicized. But with the medium term recovery effort seemingly decaying into the usual administrative disorganization that characterizes much of the GOV's actions, it has ratcheted down the publicity machine to near zero.  
McFarland